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The Voice of Protection in the Nuclear Age

In the 1970s, the threat of a possible nuclear attack against the United States from Brezhnev-era Soviet Russia drove the Defense Civil Preparedness Agency (DCPA), predecessor to the Federal Emergency Management Agency, to consider a number of measures for safeguarding the population. One of these was the production of emergency public information materials offering safety instructions—during a pre-attack period of international emergency—to help Americans protect themselves during a nuclear war (Geerhart). Historian Bill Geerhart, writing for the blog *CONELRAD Adjacent* and quoting author Edward Zuckerman, explained that a short 16-millimeter film made for DCPA during the Carter administration might be the “last movie” to have aired on American television during such an emergency. Some final words on the air would have been those of legendary voice-over artist Fred Collins, who lent his talent to that “last movie,” *Protection in the Nuclear Age*.

Although Collins’ link to *Protection*’s production credits remains obscure, recording samples on the World Wide Web make it clear he was the narrator of DCPA’s film. Mr. Collins had a vocal delivery that varied over the years and in different announcements. He could shift his voice markedly in pitch and inflection, from serious and reassuring, as in the opening minutes of *Protection*, to playful, youthful and almost jubilant, as in the closing seconds of this civil defense animation. He establishes a tone of resolute optimism that perfectly captures DCPA’s admonition, stating, “That idea [fatalism] could bring senseless and useless death to many, for protection is possible. And your own chances of survival will be much greater if you remember these facts about *Protection in the Nuclear Age*” (qtd. in Geerhart).

Collins became a signature voice for ABC News, as author Joan Baker explained at the Website for her book *Secrets of Voice-Over Success*. In a short audio montage of Collins' professional efforts posted on Ms. Baker's site, the announcer delivers a promo for *World News Tonight with Peter Jennings*, *PrimeTime*, *20/20 Wednesday*, and Cartoon Network. He utters the familiar "tag" included at the end of countless programs and on one particular 1996 ABC telecast: "More Americans get their news from ABC News than from any other source." According to Baker, during his lifetime the late Fred Collins "served as a spokesman for more than 300 of the Fortune 500 companies." Having passed away, his voice is now retired; nevertheless, scholars will continue to value his contribution: The voice heard on what could have been the last television broadcast seen in the United States.

Works Cited

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